

INAUGURAL ADDRESS

DELIVERED AT THE

ANNUAL COMMENCEMENT

OF

KNOX COLLEGE,

GALESBURG, ILLINOIS,

JUNE 24, A. D. 1858,

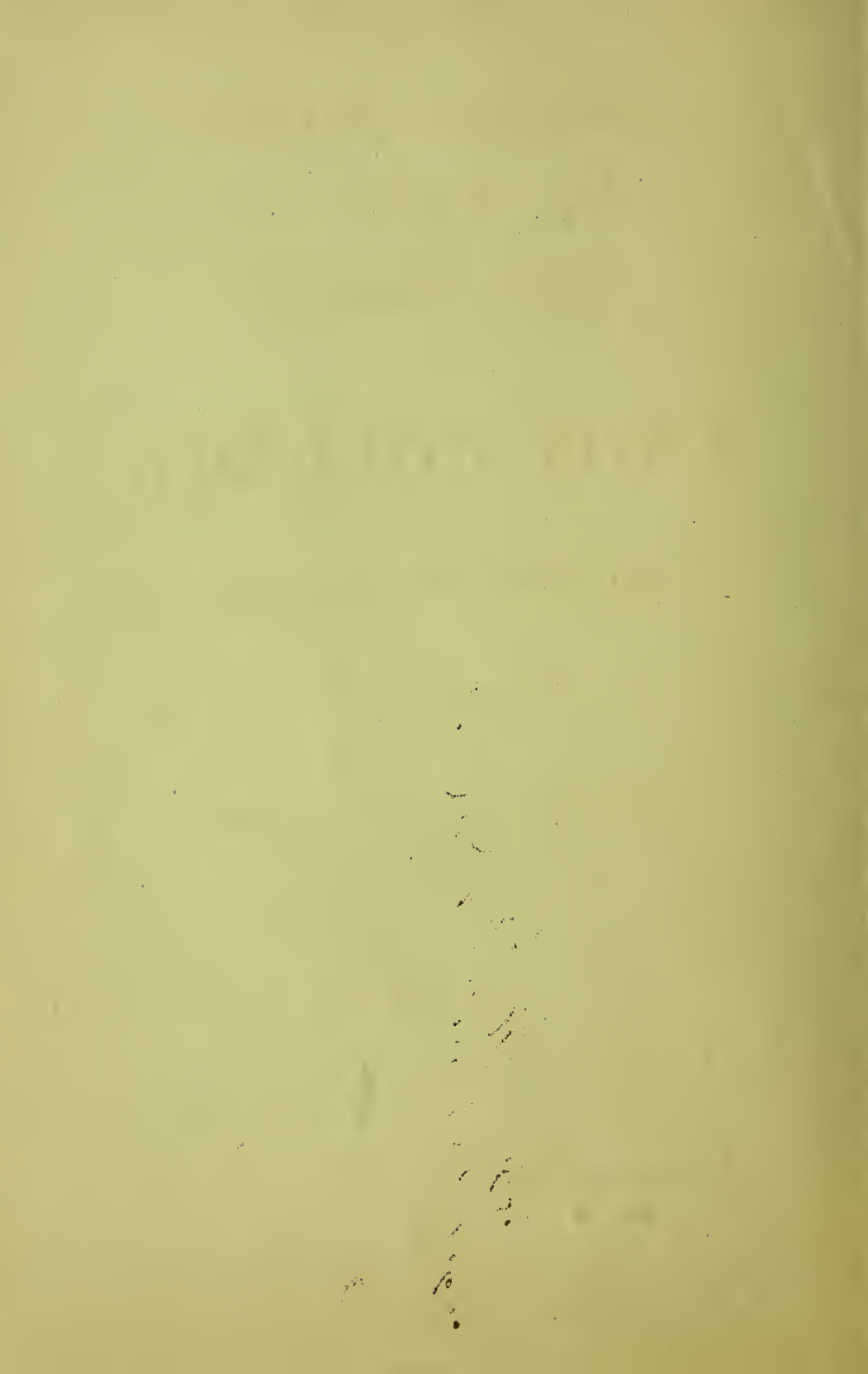
BY REV. H. CURTIS, D. D.,

PRESIDENT OF THE COLLEGE.

CHICAGO:

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DAILY PRESS AND TRIBUNE BOOK AND JOB PRINTING HOUSE, NO. 43 CLARK STREET.

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THE COLLEGE—ITS MISSION.

[The following address was hastily written, and is now printed as delivered, with all its imperfections, except two or three slight verbal corrections, lest any modification might awaken discussion as to what was actually uttered on the occasion.]

WHEN a man is called to occupy an important post, and great interests are to be intrusted to him, it is customary—it is expected of him—that he shall express publicly his views of the work to which he is called; and indicate somewhat the principles by which he will be guided; the objects he will aim to accomplish; and the general course of action he will deem it his duty to pursue. There is an obvious fitness and propriety in this custom. In assuming an important administrative office, it is well that a man should foreshadow in some measure the character and spirit of his administration. The promises thus given in advance will show the community what to expect; will be a chart to guide his after course, if he be honest; and if he seem at any time inclined to swerve, these remembered promises may be flung in the face of the unfaithful official, to shame him back to consistency.

The very short time (a little over two weeks) which has elapsed since my acceptance of the post to which I have been invited by the Board of Trust of KNOX COLLEGE, and my continued duties as a Pastor meantime, may be some apology for me, if the thoughts suggested on this occasion should be deemed common place, and if the form and arrangement of them be somewhat like other extemporaneous productions, unstudied and ill digested.

If any one truth may be safely assumed as generally admitted by all classes, it is the importance, nay, the absolute necessity of popular education. For, to their praise be it spoken, many who have enjoyed no advantages of education themselves, feeling deeply their deficiencies, are among the most zealous in seeking to

secure such advantages for their children. The popular mind in this country is essentially right on this subject. Our political institutions assume the intelligence of the people. And the national and state governments have made liberal provision to secure this result. Our religion favors, nay, almost requires it. And public sentiment demands it. In laboring to promote education—the education of the people—no one need fear that he will lose the favor of any body, unless it be that of a self-convicted priesthood, who teach that ignorance is the mother of devotion; or of a self-constituted oligarchy, who maintain that laborers must be slaves; or of a few unfortunate gentlemen, who have property to be taxed, but no children to be educated. A few (not all) of this class are disposed to say, “Let every man take care of his own;” and *their own* are acres and dollars only, not minds and hearts. Others there are of this class, of larger heart and purer mold; men who have become, in the truest sense, public benefactors, by endowing literary institutions, or otherwise fostering education, improving its character, and extending more widely its blessings. To such, all thanks. The ages to come will cherish their memory, and they shall not lose their reward.

In carrying forward the work of education, Institutions of various grades and of varied character are found necessary; each having its appropriate work to do, each filling its place in one great harmonious system. At the base of this great system of intellectual culture, lies the Common School; common in this, that it is designed for every child of man. At least, this is our beautiful theory, that no child, of parents however poor, of birth however exotic, of race however despised or degraded, shall grow up among us without the privilege of instruction in the first rudiments of literary and scientific knowledge. This foundation being laid, our youth can, if they choose, avail themselves of the further aid of the High School or Academy, or can read and study privately, so as to perfect themselves in those studies which will fit them for the common practical duties of life. This comes as near as possible, in a free country, to universal education. But there is a higher range of intellectual life. The Christian ministry, the legal and medical professions, the business of instruction in all the higher branches of learning, and the various departments of literary and scientific labor, these all demand a wider range of investigation, and a higher culture. To all these professions the College holds somewhat the same relation that the Common School does to the

ordinary business of life. It lays a common basis for them all. It is occupied mainly in doing foundation work. It imparts much useful knowledge directly, and it prepares the way and affords the means for other acquisitions in after life. But its chief object is discipline and training. It seeks to form in young men habits of study, and to teach the difficult art of application. It inculcates an accurate knowledge of language, and educates the mind to a nicer discrimination of thought. It aims to strengthen the reasoning powers, teaching a man how to reason correctly, and training him to perceive the logical relation and sequence of thoughts and ideas. Association with others in study leads also to constant comparison of thought, and expression, and opinion, among those thus associated, teaching them to estimate their own powers aright; accustoming them to friendly conflict of mind with mind in debate, without irritation; thus quickening and sharpening the intellectual powers, and training young men for the labors and conflicts of subsequent life. It should also be an important object in this stage of education, to cultivate the moral powers. The conscience needs to be enlightened; the social affections to be guided and strengthened; and the religious sensibilities to be fostered and developed. College intercourse and friendships, too, constitute no unimportant part of education; and these should be made auxiliary to the development of the whole man, refining and elevating his character, improving his manners, and molding his soul aright. To accomplish such a work as this is the appropriate mission of the College; to lay a broad, and firm, and well compacted foundation for a liberal education, to be built up and perfected afterward; and along with this, to aid in developing a symmetrical character, thus fitting men for an honorable, virtuous, and useful life.

The relation of Colleges to the State is not distinctly marked, and cannot be easily defined. Common Schools are so nearly universal in their reach, that no serious objection has been found to lie against national and state appropriations for their support. But institutions of higher range, embracing as they do fewer pupils, and interesting directly a smaller portion of voters and tax payers, have been less frequently and freely aided. An unreasonable prejudice has existed in many minds against such institutions, as aristocratic in their character, and designed for particular classes of society. It has been supposed that their advantages for mental culture inure to the benefit of the few only. It would

not be difficult to show, from the catalogues of different institutions, that every class of men in society have been represented in our American colleges; that they are preëminently democratic institutions, bringing the best education in the land within the reach of the poorest boy, if he have the energy, and talent, and perseverance to avail himself of their advantages. The son of the small farmer, of the humble mechanic, or of the poor widow, may sit in college halls side by side with the sons of our great men, and our rich men; aye, and may distance them all in the race for honor, and position, and fame. Nay, more, it were not difficult to show that the Academy and the College are essential to the success, if not to the existence, of the Common School, just as cities and small towns mutually depend upon and in turn sustain or minister to each other. This mutual relation of dependence upon and advantage to each other, in the case of educational institutions is not generally appreciated, and hence politicians have seldom dared to be liberal to the academies and colleges of the land. Another cause of embarrassment, in the relation of the College to the State, arises from the difficulty of determining the amount and kind of religious instruction to be imparted in them. All men, except a very few of the blindest kind of infidels, agree that some religious influence should be exerted, and some religious truth inculcated upon the minds of youth at every stage of their education. But who shall determine the quantity and quality of that instruction? We have no established religion. We have at Washington no Secretary or Minister of Worship. The Christian religion is the faith of the nation. But under that general name there are many separate and distinct denominations. In the Common School, where, from the age of the pupils, the religious instruction must be limited to the simplest elements of divine truth; where the daily reading of a few verses of Holy Scripture, and a short prayer, offered by the teacher, or by the school in unison, constitute the entire religious exercises of the school, there is little room or occasion for difficulty. But in the higher class of institutions, where maturer minds are congregated, and a higher and broader range of topics would naturally be brought under consideration, it has been found difficult so to regulate the matter of religious instruction and religious influence, as to satisfy the community. The effort has been to strive to equalize the matter between the denominations, by having a little of all and not much of either; and this has pleased

nobody. Hence state institutions in this country have scarcely ever flourished, and been popular with the people. Their administration has been subject to the vacillations and caprices of political parties, and their moral and religious character has been seldom satisfactory. The simplest and least exceptionable mode of fostering education in its higher departments, by the state, would seem to be a provision for free scholarships in any well-regulated institutions, which parents or pupils might choose; these scholarships to be awarded to the most deserving pupils in the primary and academic institutions of the state, thus helping the colleges by aiding worthy students; and leaving the several institutions to compete for the largest share of this patronage, by making themselves the most deserving.

I have spoken thus far of Colleges abstractly considered. It cannot be deemed out of place, on this occasion, considering the circumstances in which we are placed, if I allude more particularly to the origin and special mission of *this College*. On the 6th of June, 1835, an association was formed at Rome, Oneida Co., N. Y., according to a plan previously drawn up by Rev. Geo. W. Gale, for the express purpose of building up a group of literary institutions at the West. The subscribers to the plan were most of them pledged to remove with their families, so soon as a suitable location could be found, and the lands purchased as specified in the plan. A committee was sent out to explore the country. On their return, a meeting of the society was held at Whitesboro', N. Y.; and after some time had been spent in prayer and other religious exercises, a committee was appointed with power definitely to purchase the lands and locate the institutions. This was done in October, 1835. Ten thousand three hundred and thirty-seven acres of prairie land, embracing the ground on which we now stand, were purchased at government price. Some improved farms and timber lands in the vicinity were added, for the convenience of the colonists, and for immediate use. This was the origin of the settlement of this town, and of the foundation of these affiliated institutions. The lands were laid out according to the original plan, and enough was sold, at advanced prices, to the original members of the society and to others, to pay the expenses of the enterprise hitherto; leaving a few thousand dollars, with which the Board might commence their educational work. The College was named "Prairie College," and the town received the name it now bears. A Board of Trustees was elected, to whom was committed the funds, and

the entire charge of the enterprise. In the fall of 1836, a sufficient number of the Board of Trust had arrived on the ground to enable them to transact business.

A charter was obtained from the Legislature of Illinois, changing the name of the Institution to Knox College; lands were set apart for a Theological Seminary, for a Cemetery, and for a Presbyterian Church. This was done by the old Board of Trustees elected by the Association at Whitesboro'. The new Board of Trust created by the charter, composed in part of members of the old Board, met August 9th, 1837, at Knoxville, accepted the trust committed to them, received the property and funds from the old Board, legalized all their transactions, and pledged themselves to carry out, as fully as their means would permit, the purposes and designs of the original association, as expressed in the plan adopted in New York, two years before. The enterprise was now fairly under way. It had, at this early stage, a distinct and definite character, as much so as Harvard, or Yale, or Brown, or Williams, or Nassau Hall.

With respect to the subsequent difficulties that have arisen in the Board of Trust and in the Faculty, it does not become me to speak. There is one who judgeth righteously, to whom all these things may be safely referred. We have now to do with the origin of the College mainly in this respect, that we may judge of the intent of its founders, that we may be the better able to carry that intent into practical effect. As I read the story of its origin, and look over the action of its first trustees, the following statements seem to me obvious and indisputable:

This College was designed for the laboring people of Illinois. It was planted in a rural district, far from any of the great centers of commerce and of wealth, where it must of necessity always be surrounded by a population essentially agricultural. In its first organization, it was designed to be a manual labor institution. This was found to be impracticable, in the further development of the undertaking. But the design to make it such, shows the intent of its founders.

It was a religious institution in its first conception. Religious men devised the plan, subscribed the money, led the way in the movement, endured the hardships of the first settlement; and they designed that these Institutions, whose foundation stones they were then laying, amid privation and toil, should be nurseries of sound learning, imbued with the spirit of fervent piety, regulated by a

Scriptural faith, unfolding itself in earnest, practical godliness. It was not designed to be sectarian. And yet it was expected that, as a matter of course, the prevailing type of Christian sentiment here would be a Calvinistic faith, acting in and through Presbyterian organizations. This was the faith of those who originated the enterprise. This was the character of their first organization. And for many years no other organization was proposed or seriously considered. And yet it was not a sectarian movement. A Christian man must not only believe in Christianity in general, but he must believe something in particular. And his faith on those points which constitute the distinctive characteristics of particular denominations, will define his denominational character. Not to have a creed, and a well-defined, distinctive religious character, indicates not *liberality*, as some suppose, but religious indifference rather, or a vacillating mind that has no fixed opinions, or a lack of honest frankness, as though the man were ashamed or afraid to avow what he does believe, and intended by concealment to cheat somebody. Any Christian man who is fit to be a public teacher, will have firmly-established and well-defined religious sentiments; and it is exceedingly important that in each public institution there should be a general harmony of sentiment. This will not beget an intense denominationalism. It will prevent it, rather, by removing the elements and occasions of jealousy and strife, by which sectarianism is nourished. Girard's idea of making his institution religious, without being sectarian, simply by prohibiting clergymen to enter its gates, was both silly and absurd; as though laymen could not be sectarian; and as though all clergymen were so necessarily. The founders of Knox College designed it to be a Presbyterian institution; not Presbyterian as opposed to other denominations; not as a propagandist agency; but as Beloit is Congregational and liberal, just so they expected this to be—a coördinate instrumentality, jointly with others, to diffuse knowledge and to promote morality and religion in this young but prospectively rich and glorious country. It was planned in the most liberal spirit of union and coöperation. It was commenced and carried forward by Presbyterians, before the lamentable division of 1837 and 1838; while old and new school men were united in one organization, and had a common interest in all the institutions established by both parties. It was commenced and carried forward during the palmy period of coöperation, when Congregationalists worked harmoniously with Presbyterians in the work of education and missions,

home and foreign. We were all full of love and union then; "neither said any one that aught of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had all things common." It was assumed that there was a common faith among us, and that there were common interests, which did not need to be specially guarded by articles of copartnership, and specifications of proprietorship, and of separate rights. These institutions were designed specially for Presbyterians and Congregationalists; but not for them, even, exclusively.

Brown University, and Yale, and Hamilton, and Nassau Hall Colleges, are each denominational, yet not exclusive; have each their predominant type of religious sentiment, and are each under the leading supervision of some one denomination, and yet are not sectarian or propagandist in any such wise that a parent in New York would fear to send his son to any one of them. So here at the west we have Shurtleff, and McKendree, and Marengo, and Beloit, which have each a decided denominational supervision. And yet I think I may assume of them all what I know of one, that neither of them is in any odious sense a sectarian college. I would rather a thousand fold send a son to such an institution, whose character was undisputed and well known, than to a half and half college, where there is a balancing of power, and a constant strife for preëminence; and where jealousy, and party spirit, and suspicion, and hatred, are the natural products of such an unnatural state. If the denominational spirit and party feeling among old and new school Presbyterians, and Congregationalists, could have been so held in check that no alienations and divisions in other matters had occurred, then might our educational institutions have gone on, as some of them commenced, without ever raising the question of denominational influence, and right of ownership and control. But in the inscrutable providence of God, and through the imperfection of men, such a happy union was not permitted to continue. And we have now to adjust matters as well as we can to the present actual condition of things. Three colleges have been built up in this State (for Beloit, standing on the line, belongs to Illinois as much as to Wisconsin), by the united counsels and funds of New School Presbyterians and Congregationalists. Jacksonville is trying to balance itself on the pivot of neutrality. But every breath of wind threatens the equipoise. Beloit is strongly Congregational. Is it too much to claim that Knox College, with its indubitable parentage, with its well-known early

history, and its appropriate and significant name, shall be permitted to be held and worked mainly by those whom that name befits, and who sympathize most nearly with its founders?

I have dwelt the more at length on this point, because it has been the theme of earnest discussion in this community, and the occasion of serious diversity of opinion, and of some asperity of feeling. It ought not to be impracticable for high-minded Christian men so to arrange our institutions of learning, that the proprietary rights of all parties in interest shall be equitably regarded; the full power of each denomination which has been associated brought into exercise and left free to develop itself; and only a generous, sanctified rivalry remain from these previous strifes; each corporation striving to make its own nursling the best institution in the State. It were a noble ambition to strive to excel in this wise; to see which college can be made to impart the best culture; which can most thoroughly arouse and quicken mind; which can cultivate the best temper, infuse the best spirit, and exert on its pupils the best religious influence; in short, which can best educate the whole man, and send forth the ripest scholars, the most eloquent speakers, the most correct thinkers; and train for the country and the world the noblest spirits, and the truest men; truest to conscience and to duty—truest to humanity and to God. Let there be among our colleges only this holy rivalry, this mutual effort to excel, and the blessing of Heaven now, and the benedictions of ages to come shall rest on them all.

I may be permitted to say a few words on the subject of college government and discipline. The age of dignified authority sitting in state, and exacting humble and unquestioning subjection to enthroned Form, has passed away. Neither young men nor old are to be governed any longer by venerable robes and the insignia of office. The time for absolute rule, enforced by fines and ignominious expulsion, has also passed away. Confiscation of goods, and the greater excommunication, which are the rack and thumb-screw of college discipline, these are not instruments of government exactly adapted to our people and to the present day. And yet there must be government and order in college. Our young men will not be well educated to go forth as the teachers, and leaders, and rulers of the people; if they have not first learned themselves to be subject to law, and to obey rightful authority. And it is believed that a mild, parental government, regulated by law, and administered with impartiality, uniform and decided, yet

gentle and kind; that such a government will so commend itself to the pupils of any institution, that they shall be all on the side of order, perceiving that the government is for them and not against them. In our civil government, the conviction among the people that the laws are for the good of the people, and not for the interest of the rulers or of any privileged class; this conviction is better than a numerous police or a standing army, for the promotion of order; for it arrays every good citizen on the side of the government. The same principle may be made available in the government of the college. Let it be made apparent that college laws are but the embodiment of the wisdom of experience, drawn out in practical rules for the good of the scholars only, and hence that every disorderly student is a traitor to the best interests of his fellow students; let this, as it may be, be made apparent, and the government of the college becomes essentially self-government. If any one should be found so lost to reason, to shame, and to a sense of justice, as not to be susceptible of being influenced by such considerations, it is better that such an one should be sent quietly away. There does not seem to be sufficient reason for irritating even such an one, or mortifying his friends, by needless severity, or an ignominious branding of the criminal. With the aid and coöperation of those who will be associated with me in the conduct of this College, it will be my aim to administer the government of the Institution in accordance with these principles.

One other topic demands a moment's consideration. What should be the relation of the College to the various controverted questions of the day, in things ecclesiastical and moral? My own settled convictions are, that the college is not the place, and this early stage of education is not the fitting time, in which to inculcate distinctive opinions on doubtful or contested points, either in religion or morals. As in intellectual, so in religious and moral matters, the college is the place in which to lay foundations. Let pupils be trained to a clear apprehension of their personal responsibility; let a high sense of honor be inculcated, and an inflexible regard for truth and right; let pure sentiments, and a quick and correct moral sense be cultivated; let the principles and practical teachings of the Word of God be made familiar to the mind; and then, superadded to this, let gentlemanly manners and a courteous deportment and address be formed; and withal a habit of independent thought, and bold, frank, manly utterance, so it be also kind and conciliatory; and we may safely leave the rest to time,

and free individual action. I have great faith in truth, and conscience, and Providence, and free thought, and human progress. If right principles be inculcated, and pure sentiments, we need not fear but right conclusions will be reached by each individual acting for himself. Teachers in public institutions, like other men, may form their own opinions on every question of religion, or reform, or politics; and may utter or publish those opinions at their discretion, in fitting ways and on appropriate occasions. But they should not compromise the character of the college by becoming propagandists of any individual or partizan peculiarities, nor should the college chapel, or lecture or recitation rooms be misappropriated to the inculcation of any such peculiarities. We may mold children and youth, before they are ripened into maturity, in almost any shape, and stamp on them almost any impression we please. But we only make them small bigots, and self-confident dogmatists, by such a process. It is better to teach a young man how to reason correctly, and then leave him to do the reasoning himself, than to reason for him. It is better to discipline his mind to careful investigation, and to sound logical deductions, and then, with a well-instructed conscience, and a warm heart, and an honest attachment to whatever is true and right, to send him forth into the world to meet questions as they arise, to face facts, and hear arguments, and weigh consequences; and if he does not decide as we would have him, it may become us to review our own judgments before we condemn liberty of thought as tending to error—before we conclude to put the minds of youth in straight jackets while in their forming state, lest they should not think as we do.

If we would form men of strong minds, self-reliant and well balanced, accustomed to reason soundly and to act intelligently; men discreet and wise; we must not forestal their judgment and preëccupy their minds with our conclusions. It does not argue very much confidence in the correctness of our own views, if we are unwilling to have others, and especially our youth, reason and judge and decide for themselves.

I would never introduce, nay, by counsel and moral influence, I would dissuade others, as far as might be, from introducing any partizan or denominational controversy or agitation within the college. Let those halls be sacred to virtue and piety, to science and literature, to friendship and refined sentiment. In the promotion of these objects, we can labor together unanimously, despite our minor differences.

Gentlemen of the Board of Trust, friends and fellow citizens, I have detained you quite too long. I feel deeply the responsibility of the trust committed to me, and the extreme delicacy of the position to which you have called me. I come here a free man, pledged to no particular policy, embarrassed by no bargain or compromise; free to counsel with the friends of the Institution, to consult its interests, and to do whatever duty and right may from time to time seem to demand. To conduct such an Institution successfully, would in any circumstances be difficult. To follow a man of the marked character and signal ability of my predecessor, is doubly difficult. And what adds still more to the difficulty of the work, is the peculiar and delicate relation which the Institution sustains to the churches of this section of the State. I can only say that I shall aim at an honest, frank, conciliatory course of action, as nearly impartial as poor human nature—*my* poor human nature—will admit. And I rejoice that in this work I shall be associated with an able and experienced corps of teachers, whom you all know, and respect, and love. In the Faculty of the College, with the exception of the Presidency, there will be no change. May a brilliant success mark its future course.

The College—I love it. All my recollections of it are grateful ones. It took me by the hand, when I stood on the borders of manhood, a poor, trembling youth, with few friends and fewer resources, aspiring to be and to do something, but not knowing what to do, or how to do it. The College was my friend. It kindly led me up the hill; showed me the world, past and present; pointed out the paths that led into the future, and encouraged me, all timid and fearful, with whispers of hope and words of cheer, to enter the great arena, and, with what power I had, to do my part with others toiling there. I bless the College. It struck the key note of my life, whose echoes linger yet. It gave the first great impulse to my soul, pointed the way, and bade me onward. The American College—it has been an *Alma Mater* indeed to ten thousand struggling, panting souls, that otherwise had pined on in obscurity. Twenty years ago, there shot up here, from the prairie sod, the germ of a town and of a group of literary institutions. That germ had been borne from the Empire State of the East to this young Empire State of the West. It was planted here in hope, and for the ages to come. Besides the “Robin’s Nest,” and its young, hopeful offspring, there was nothing commenced in the way of educational Institutions of high order, west of the Illinois

river, and northward to parts unknown. There are here to-day those who were at the planting, and who helped to water and nurse that young germ of promise. Long may these Fathers live to rejoice in the work of their hands. We stand here to-day and wonder at the growth of twenty years. God grant that such counsels may prevail and such blessings follow, that twenty years hence, those who gather here may witness a progress as wonderful as the past. It is in view, and but a little way off, the time when a thousand sons of Knox, scattered over this and other States, occupying the high places of honor and of influence, shall look back with affection and pride to this place, and to these College Halls, as to the hearth stones and nursery of their mental life, and shall love to gather here at these recurring anniversaries. Aye, and more; Knox College has its daughters, too. And these without number, in the scattered homes which they bless and adorn, shall remember Galesburg; and they shall love to come back to these familiar scenes, to meet familiar faces, to greet beloved friends, and to revive the hallowed memories and associations of youth and of school life.

We stand to-day at a new point of departure, in the history of this enterprise. A toilsome past has been traversed, marked by privation and hopeful endurance, and ill-requited labor. For this labor, and endurance, and privation, the reward is laid up on high. A brighter future stretches out before us, a future full of hope and promise. A pure, free air breathes around. The heavens smile benignantly above. The omens are all propitious. May a gracious God still watch over and guide our way, dispelling every fear, and more than realizing every hope we cherish now.

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